



Op-Ed: China's Aircraft Carrier: The Good, The Bad, And The Ugly

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China test-sailed its first aircraft carrier on August 10, 2011. The maiden sail was remarkably low key, but its significance is far-reaching.

China's journey to this debut started in the mid-1990s when it approached Ukraine for the possibility of acquiring the half-built, but practically abandoned, Soviet aircraft carrier *Varyag*. The keel of this hulk was laid in 1985 and the ship was intended to serve in the Soviet Pacific Fleet, however, the construction was abruptly halted with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Ukraine, home to the Soviet Union's warship industry, kept the unfinished carrier as a “divorce asset,” but it had no money or need to complete the project. China eventually acquired the ship with a \$20 million auction bid in 1998. At the time, this sea monster was literally an empty and rusty shell, since all of the critical equipment had been removed, including the rudder. China, however, was determined to bring it back to life.

Over the next 3 years, China went out of its way to negotiate with Turkey for the passage of *Varyag* from the Black Sea through the Bosphorus, with China providing a bizarre assurance for safety and offering lucrative economic incentives to Turkey. In November 2001, this floating colossal was safely towed through the Istanbul Strait. It continued its nerve-racking journey through the Mediterranean Sea, and then over the rough waters around Africa, the Indian Ocean, the Southern Pacific, finally arriving in China's northern port city of Dalian, next to the Chinese Naval Academy, the cradle of China's naval officers, in March 2002.

It took the Chinese almost 10 years to refurbish the warship, with undisclosed, but understandable additional expenses and tremendous effort. A Chinese Defense Ministry spokesperson humbly reported that the *Varyag* would make short test sails in the next year or so. He also admitted that when the carrier becomes fully operational, it would be commissioned to the Chinese Navy as a training platform; this diesel and steam-powered aircraft carrier, after all, has limited capacity for distant battle missions.

Why does China want to acquire a weapon system that is expensive to build and operate, with mostly known potential, and is increasingly vulnerable to anti-ship weapons? What is China's real intent for becoming an “aircraft carrier-faring great power”? Will the days when China's aircraft carrier battle groups have a routine presence in the Western Pacific and beyond ever come?

Military Modernization with Chinese Characteristics.

China set its military modernization in motion in the mid-1990s, but ahead of its overall modernization schedule and due to urgent imperatives. The most telling reason for the change was the Taiwan Strait crisis of 1995-96, during which China found itself in a desperate situation to acquire credible military capability to prevent Taiwan from seeking independence and to deal with an almost assured U.S. military intervention. During this tense situation, the two U.S. aircraft carrier battle groups dispatched by the Clinton administration to the troubled waters were viewed by the Chinese as quite an insult.

Another motivation for Chinese modernization stemmed from the challenge presented by the U.S.-led revolution in military affairs in the evolving information age. The display of U.S. military power in the Gulf War of 1991, the Kosovo air campaign of 1999, and the anti-terrorist operations in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 2000s so shocked the Chinese leaders that they felt China must take urgent measures or be marginalized in military affairs for good.

China's answer to these challenges was to take a two-pronged approach that on the one hand accelerated the improvement of its military's so-called industrial-age fighting capabilities — namely war planes, battleships, missiles, and mechanized land power — and on the other hand, the Chinese military simultaneously moved into the battleground of the unfolding information age. This undertaking is known as the “transformation of military affairs with Chinese characteristics.”

The acquisition of aircraft carrier battle groups is undoubtedly the most controversial issue in the first leg of this military transformation. It is clear now that the proponents of the aircraft carrier prevailed in China's debate. Chinese leaders are apparently convinced that the aircraft carrier has not outlived its usefulness. They are willing to invest significant resources over the next 10 to 15 years to build several homemade aircraft carriers. These aircraft carriers are expected to be built in time to help China pursue its interests in the Western Pacific and beyond.

Aircraft Carrier: The Missing Instrument of China's National Security Strategy.

It is gratifying to the Chinese that they are becoming an aircraft carrier-faring great power, although China is arguably the last contemporary great power to acquire this capability. However, the real intent for this expensive undertaking is by all means practical. Thirty years ago, China bid farewell to its 12-nautical mile (nm) territorial water defense and switched to a “near sea defense” strategy. Although China has never specified the scope of this strategy, it is increasingly clear that the “near sea” includes China's territorial waters as well as its claimed 200-nm Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) around the nation's extended seashores. A critical issue for this evolving defense strategy is that China has many disputes in this vast area, the most challenging of which are conflicts with the United States over U.S. military activities in the Chinese-claimed EEZs and particularly the Taiwan issue. China is also engaged in territorial disputes with Japan in the East China Sea and with several Southeast Asian nations in the South China Sea. Consequently, China has long desired to have an aircraft carrier-led blue water navy to strengthen its position relative to these disputes.

In the last 30 years, China's interest in a blue water navy has greatly expanded, particularly now that China's aspirations are global. A few years ago, Chinese President Hu Jintao put forward a new mission for China's military in the new century: the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is to protect China's interest wherever in the world those interests may be. Over time and with changing circumstances, China's demand for an aircraft carrier battle group capability has become stronger and more urgent. The *Varyag* gives China an opportunity to learn about the construction and operation of aircraft carriers. In the next 15 years, China is expected to deploy this missing instrument of national power as part of its national security strategy.

If You Want Peace, Prepare for War.

The Chinese claim that they are a peace-loving people, and that China seeks peace in the Western Pacific. However, China's pursuit of an aircraft carrier capability indicates that the Chinese also understand that international peace comes with a price — it has to be made, and paradoxically, with the backing of force. In addition, China's “century of humiliation” has taught the Chinese a hard lesson — if you are weak, you will be bullied. A prosperous China must have a strong military.

Many chastise China for its unyielding effort to obtain the *Varyag*, but one should not underestimate China's ability to excel at copying others. Unless China finds its efforts completely worthless, which is highly unlikely, the coming of Chinese-made, and most likely nuclear-powered, aircraft carriers is a foregone conclusion.

One need not accuse China for projecting power in an attempt to maintain peace and stability. China is only doing what all nations do to pursue their national interests. It is therefore a sound national security policy for the United States, Japan, and the South China Sea territorial disputants to take China's coming aircraft carriers seriously. Even though it will take China 15 to 20 years to establish a formidable aircraft carrier-led blue-water navy, it would be foolhardy to idly sit by. In the meantime, we wish that all of the efforts to prepare for war will ultimately make peace in the Western Pacific.

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